

An Invitation to a Tri-Faith Neighborhood (B)

Rev. Tim Anderson won the golf game, but as he walked to his car, his excitement had nothing to do with golf, and everything to do with the invitation to be in intentional relationship with Jews and Muslims. Bob Freeman had been persuasive: if the Episcopal diocese were to develop another church in western Omaha, certainly it could be cost-effective to share parking lots with Temple Israel and the American Institute of Islamic Studies and Culture. More importantly, the denomination was committed to interfaith relationships. Anderson took the idea back to the Episcopal diocese, the Executive Commission, and the Bishop and Trustees, all of whom eagerly embraced the unique concept of a tri-faith neighborhood.

Meetings with representatives from all three Abrahamic faith groups were scheduled without delay. Within two months, on October 24, 2006, the representatives drafted a Memorandum of Understanding to serve as Tri-Faith's guiding document. It concluded with a vision statement: "In working together, our vision is to build bridges of Respect, Trust and Acceptance, to challenge stereotypes of each other, to learn from one another, and to counter the influence of extremists and agents of hate."¹ It provided that each of the three participating faiths, called "Participants" would build and retain complete, separate ownership and control of its own building; and that each would look for opportunities to create shared space and relationships with the other two faith groups. Early in their meetings, Tri-Faith members shared their fears as well as their dreams. As a result, the Memorandum of Understanding also included the pledge: "No Participant shall engage in any proselytizing (intending to convert members of other Participants)."²

Tri-Faith leaders eventually decided on the goal of building a fourth building—an interfaith center—in addition to shared parking and green space. The interfaith building would be owned by the Tri-Faith Initiative, a separate 501(c)3 with a board made up of equal numbers of Jews, Christians and Muslims from the three participating faith groups. They envisioned the interfaith center as a place for scholarship to increase religious literacy among people of all faiths and ages, a place of social and cultural exchange including music and art, and most of all, a place where new relationships could flourish so that it might serve as a model of peaceful co-existence.³ Azriel recalled the wars of his youth in Israel as he reflected on his hopes for the interfaith center: "I want this to always be a place where I can remember my friends who died in the war."⁴

The Tri-Faith Initiative Takes Shape

Committed to creating relationships, the three faith communities began collaborating immediately. One of its early programs was a class called *Tri-Faith 101*, which offered easy entry discussions about aspects of faith that had parallels in all three religions. Over the next several years, the Tri-Faith leadership coordinated worship, social and educational exchanges between the faith groups, summer picnics, interfaith youth activities, and the formation of InterPlay—a monthly playgroup for children in K-5th grade. Interfaith events like a special Passover Seder drew hundreds of participants from the three faiths.

In 2008, Tri-Faith hired its first part-time Executive Director, Nancy Kirk. A gregarious woman who loves to learn, Kirk wrote a 44-year plan for the rest of her life when she turned 60. One of the goals in

Marcia Sietstra prepared this Pluralism Project case as the basis for discussion and education. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective leadership.

her plan was to explore the changing role of religion in a pluralistic society. Kirk helped design many of Tri-Faith's programs. Early on, board members identified hospitality as an important part of each program. Kirk often used the metaphor of Abraham's tent when she told Tri-Faith's story and explained the emphasis on hospitality.

Tradition says that Abraham's tent was open on all four sides to welcome people from all nations, all cultures, and all religions. In a desert economy...you had to be willing to offer hospitality to strangers because you needed to be able to rely on hospitality from strangers when you were traveling. We try to make radical hospitality part of every program we do, because it's one of the real core concepts of all three Abrahamic faiths.⁵

The Tri-Faith Board met monthly, while a sub-committee engaged the difficult search for land. It had to be large enough to accommodate four building sites, preferably located in western Omaha, and not too close to existing Jewish, Muslim or Episcopal worship centers. During this time, friendship and trust developed between the three faith group leaders—Mohiuddin, Azriel, and Anderson—and between other participants in Tri-Faith. Anderson explained:

What we have come to is affection for one another as human beings, as people of very strong faiths, which we believe are in the same God, the God of Abraham. Although we live out our faith experience in different ways, we see one another as children of God and that allows us to have affection and real care and concern for the other. And I think that is the ultimate goal of our initiative, to offer more people this opportunity to enter into those kinds of relationships that move beyond the fears and the unknown and to come to know each other as children of God.⁶

Mohiuddin, like Anderson and Azriel, expressed his strong sense that they all worship the same God—Abraham's God—because Jews, Christians and Muslims all trace their lineage back to Abraham. Mohiuddin quoted Surah 29:46 of the Qur'an, which he translated: "...[O]ur God and your God is One, and to Him do we submit."⁷

The leaders of Tri-Faith also expressed a shared emphasis on living one's faith by promoting justice and peace. Azriel said:

There is a tradition in Judaism of taking the Torah out of the ark and circling the congregation and people approach the Torah by kissing it. But it's not *that* [which] we need to do. What we need to do is to open the scroll and see what God told us we need to do: it is the values, the way we handle the orphan, the way we handle the widow, the stranger, that is more important than kissing a scroll... I think each community is interested in this project because it can make our people better.

Criticism, Questions, and Conversations

The Tri-Faith Initiative has not been immune to criticism and questions, whether from reluctant community members or those concerned that the project advocates syncretism. Kirk is often asked if Tri-Faith is planning to merge the three Abrahamic faiths to create a new religion. Just the opposite is true, she said:

The fact is, as you talk deeply with people of other faiths you explore your own in much greater depth in order to not be a total dummy in the conversation. And that has been a universal experience of everybody who has gotten involved... We're finding that that same thing is extending to people who are becoming active in our programs, is that it's awakening a hunger to

know more about their own religion and as they learn about something in another religion, they go back and reexamine, asking ‘Do we have the equivalent thing in our faith?’

Freeman, who first sketched out the idea of co-location, acknowledged that there have been three distinct reactions in the Temple Israel community: “...There are those who don’t care, which is normal. There are many who for a variety of reasons think it’s great, but there are some who think it’s a bad idea.”⁸ He added: “The good news is that our religious teachings, our Temple leadership, and especially our actual experiences strongly support participation.”⁹

Freeman’s own experiences in the Tri-Faith Initiative have been transformative. He recalled that, for many years, he struggled with attending services at his wife’s Episcopal Church. “I was always there passively because it was a *church*...it was not a religious experience for me, because it was not the temple.” Yet when Freeman related this story to a Muslim friend, he asked, “Can’t you pray to God on a mountain, or anywhere out in nature?” When Freeman replied in the affirmative, his friend added: “I can pray anywhere—out in nature, even in a church. Isn’t God everywhere? Why would God not be present to you just because you walked into a church?” The conversation was a turning point for Freeman, who admitted with a smile: “It took a Muslim to teach a Jew how to find God in Church.”¹⁰

Anderson, who is leading the development of the new Tri-Faith Episcopal congregation, talked about the importance of being grounded in one’s own faith tradition: “Our two core values we’ve identified so far in the new community are radical hospitality and very intense and intentional Christian formation.” Accordingly, he wants his congregation to have “a full understanding of their Christian faith, so that they can enter into a dialogue with other religions.” Yet some have asked Anderson a pointed question: If they follow the rule to not convert other Tri-Faith participants, how can they obey The Great Commission to “go...and make disciples of all the nations” (Mt. 28:19)?” Anderson responded:

Well, the Great Commission—first of all, the *greatest* commission was to love God, and love your neighbor as yourself—those are the two Great Commandments. The commission itself is to go out and make disciples, and there are various ways of doing that. And our way is to try to love God and love our neighbor. And in this case, on one side of us we have Muslims and on the other side we have Jews as our neighbors. And we’re called to love them.

Postscript

On December 13, 2011, representatives from the three faith communities and the Tri-Faith Initiative announced the purchase of four contiguous parcels of land. Each parcel will be independently owned and operated. Together, these 35 acres will be the future site of the Tri-Faith neighborhood.

¹ Tri-Faith Initiative, “Memorandum of Understanding,” Tri-Faith Initiative website, http://trifaith.org/?page_id=677, accessed January 2012.

² Ibid.

³ Tri-Faith Initiative, “Case Statement,” Tri-Faith Initiative website, http://trifaith.org/?page_id=673, accessed January 2012.

⁴ All quotes from Rabbi Aryeh Azriel: Rabbi Aryeh Azriel, interviews by author, Omaha, NE, March 13, 2011.

⁵ All quotes from Nancy Kirk, unless otherwise indicated: Nancy Kirk, phone interviews by author, April 11 and July 14, 2011.

⁶ All quotes from Tim Anderson: Tim Anderson, phone interview by author, March 28, 2011 & Omaha, NE, July 18, 2011.

⁷ All quotes from Syed Mohiuddin: Syed Mohiuddin, interviews by author, Omaha, NE, May 18 & July 17, 2011.

⁸ Annette van de Kamp-Wright, "Tri-Faith Initiative Moves Forward," from *Jewish Press*, posted on the Jewish Federation of Omaha website, <http://www.jewishomaha.org/page.aspx?id=249591>, accessed January 2012.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ All quotes in this paragraph from Bob Freeman: Bob Freeman, conversation with author, Omaha, NE, July 18, 2011.

Note: This case study is adapted from a chapter of Rev. Marcia Moret Sietstra's doctoral project for Andover-Newton Theological School.